

New Year Festival

Sri Lankan New Year Festival – 2007

or Shall We Not Call It

Sri Lankan National Celebrations - 2007

Professor Dhammavihari Thera

The concept of any New Year Celebration or Festival, in reality, only marks a date and a point of time from which a group of people of specific identity wish to re-start another period of 365 or 366 days, with a new awareness and a new determination to make their lives within this incoming period better than what they have been. Many cultures of the world, specially in India, made use of the movement of the sun and the moon in the zodiac to determine these, thus giving us the solar and lunar calendars. These implied a lot of planetary conjunctions, *nakkhatta* or *nakat*, yielding many moments which are believed to be both auspicious and inauspicious for humans on earth. Experts in the field, both monks and laymen in Sri Lanka, would offer you unquestionable advice on these. These guide many people with a harmless degree of credibility as to when to start and when not to start work, even in their day to day life, avoiding for instance, the ill-foreboding *rāhu-kālaya* on every single day of the week. Many Sri Lankans of today, we know for certain, wise and less wise, elite and less elite strictly observe these.

The word festival implies some form of celebration which is either religious or secular. But it is no secret that in Sri Lanka to-day, concepts like religious and ethnic are taboo, because both religion and ethnicity have been lying too long in the devil's workshop, of whose ownership one does not need to guess. It is the one or the other through which the weapons used in the present conflict in Sri Lanka have been forged and turned out. Until very, very recent times, we freely

used to say Sinhala and Tamil New Year, with the words Hindu and Buddhist being thrown in with as much ease.

Even with both parties concerned, the Hindus and the Buddhists or the Sinhalas and the Damilas, sitting apart and eating and drinking severally, let the dawn of a new year be adequately celebrated. It is good for both men and women, both young and old and even for those yet unborn, to carry with them thoughts of good will and well wishing to one another. The experience of years, both in our own native land, and in the world outside, tell us so. As things in our world are set-up today, the reckoning of a new year, anywhere, does necessarily come once in 365 years [or in 366 every leap year]. A simple question any child would like to ask is where do we start and why do we start there?

Let me start with something very personal. The year was 1949 and that was exactly 58 years ago when I was very much a young batchler, living in the household. The scene was set in Wales, a part of the island cluster of what goes with great pride as Great Britain. On the night of December 31, I was spending a holiday there in Cardiff with a group of student friends and we were invited to a country home-party to usher in the New Year. The guests that night were happily of diverse ethnic groups and from many different parts of the world. We were all very glad to be together. We were equally happy to be able to jointly wish one another yet another specified length of one year, expecting everyone to be full of happiness and prosperity during the ensuing period. What a lovely expression of human large-heartedness.

Out of a moderate gathering of about twenty or thirty people at that house party, I was picked out to go out of the house as the old year was winding up on the 31st night of December, and mind you that was just a few minutes before midnight, and on a freezing Winter night, with a little bit of snow around. I was to re-enter the house as the clock struck twelve, vigorously ushering in the New Year for the benefit of everyone. I had to bring into the house with me a piece of white bread, obviously for abundance of food for the coming year, a silver coin

symbolizing wealth in gold and silver, and forget not, a piece of black coal to keep the Winter fires burning for warmth in the cold weather. Believe me, it was my Sri Lankan dark complexion which made me the winner that night, because they believed at that time, and I hope they still do, that our dark colour effectively keeps the devil away and the evil he brings along with him.

In Sri Lanka, there are very many things which we, as a people, have shared together for centuries, even if we wish to ignore and forget them today, for reasons which could not be better described except as being stupid and petty. We call each other chauvinists, being needlessly arrogant and critical, without for a moment realising that the pot is calling the kettle black. Using a common solar calendar, we have learnt to reckon the commencement of our year, the so-called Hindu or Sinhala New Year, with a particular position of the sun in the zodiac in the month of April. The calendar man in the village, the *nakat rala*, made a living from generation to generation, providing us this information seasonally, and carrying home in return bagfuls of red, rich country rice, *Kekulu hal* and not Basmati, and other provisions from the gratified village folk who were amazingly generous, a few days before the event.

Even from more than thousands of years before the Buddha, Vedic Aryans of India had learnt to venerate the Sun God, Savitar as the life giver. He is undoubtedly the chief guest at any life-welcoming ceremony. So as we think of celebrating the New Year, following the solar calendar, as Hindus or Buddhists, Sinhalas or Damilas, let us not forget that we owe a word of thanks to the Sun God. For he stands in the sky well above the Hindus and the Buddhists, Sinhalas and Damilas. Can we not learn to share peacefully these gifts of nature, and in such sharing, sense a pulse of brotherhood amongst us?

Beyond this point, if any group or groups resists cultural syntheses of any sort, let them feel free to do what they like, but please, without any venom or bitterness, to part ways and get their identities established, whether they be religious, ethnic or any other, thinly veiled and subtly camouflaged. The choice

legitimately is theirs. But it is best we do not forget that everybody would be equally mindful not to allow any trespass in the expression of one's own rights and identities.

In pre-Mahindian Sri Lanka, such a great festival day was the full moon of Poson or June. While Venerable Mahinda's flight from his father's land of India was scheduled to touch down at Mihintale at a later hour in the afternoon, King Devanampiya Tissa had already instructed his people to commence their festivities for the occasion or *Nakat keli* with water sports in the Tisaveva in Anuradhapura. For a better brand of sport, misguided as this royal master Devanampiya Tissa was, he set out on the deer hunt. For the luck of Sri Lankans, or of humanity anywhere in the world, Tissa's encounter with Thera Mahinda brought a complete halt in Sri Lanka to this kind of supid buffoonery, of royal or state pastime, of hunting for pleasure, whether that be fox, deer or Bengal tiger.

The culture of this country, let it be remembered by the state and the people here, took a remarkable new turn in their attitude to life. A serious error was detected and somebody had the courage to point it out and get things corrected. We very much regret the absence of such characters in our midst today. Within a couple of centuries, the rulers began to set up sanctuaries, with an island-wide ban on slaughter of all animals or *ma ghata* [*Maghatam karayi dipe sabbesam yeva paninam*. Mhv. 41.v.30]. Amandagamini, Silakala, Aggabodhi IV and Mahinda III are among kings who pursued this policy. In extending this sense of mercy to the world of animals, birds and beasts and even fish are all equally included [*Macchānaṃ migapakkhīnaṃ* . Mhv. 48. v. 97].

If Sri Lankans need a festival which is well and truly national for Sri Lankans as a whole and which meaningfully marks the birth of a New Year, where could they find one better, besides Poson. Poson indeed marks the birth of a new culture, hence of a new era in Sri Lanka. There is no denying that Poson has a religio-cultural identity which is truly national. No matter as to the source of its

genesis, who brought it here and from where it came. It has stayed long enough in this country to be all-embracing, in spite of all the contamination thrown into it, from within and without.

Wesak, on the other hand, has a universality which is international. The world has already recognised it. Let Buddhists become seriously aware of Buddhism and Buddhistness during the month of Wesak in which the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha is believed to have taken place. The world today is awakening to the worth of this message. Let us all join hands everywhere in implementing Buddhism's this message of Love, Share and Care. Our future Buddha is none other than Maitreya or Metteyya, i.e. Love and Friendliness. Celebrate Wesak with this idea in the forefront, with more changes of head and heart and consequent magnanimity in our behaviour. With less meaningless advertising on pandals at somebody's expense.

It is in the following month of June or Poson that we received this message in Sri Lanka. Nationally, it is even more important for Sri Lankans than Wesak, for our cultural enrichment as humans. Think seriously of making Poson, from this year onwards, the National Annual Festival of Sri Lanka which we shall celebrate more meaningfully and for our edification. This will re-awaken us to the vastness of our cultural inheritance and our identity on the world scene. This is the way for peace on earth and goodwill among men.



New Resolves for the Sinhala and Hindu New Year Day Celebrations 1

[03- 04- 96]

Professor Dhammavihari Thera

Dear Listeners. Greetings to you on this New Year Day which the Buddhists and the Hindus, i.e. the Sinhala and Tamils of Sri Lanka have celebrated without any clash of interest within our living memory of more than three score years and ten. Who among the saner men and women of this country needs to bother about fixing its ethnic or religious identity.

These celebrations mark the pass over from one old worn out year to another new one, according to the time reckonings we have traditionally adopted, according to the solar or lunar calendars. Those of you, at least in the Sinhala Buddhist community who are familiar with the rituals connected with the New Year, would recollect how we wind up and terminate the old year with the ***Nona Gate***, symbolically rejecting the past as you break up the old three-stone fire-place and reset it a little later for the New Year.

But I guess, very few of you know anything at all about these. In fact, the ***Nona Gate*** is the time-wise buffer zone when you refrain from all household work and use it essentially for the performance of religiously directed activities. This is why your New Year instruction note refers to it as ***Punya Kālaya***.

This is a ritually planned circuit-breaker in your life style in the home. It is undertaken, whether you know it or not, to enable you to periodically reset and restart your life, at least with annual intervals. It is virtually a process of correcting old mistakes you have made and resetting your new path of action. Following this, you would have your old mistakes forgiven. This whole process should really be viewed as stimulating and invigorating. As productive and fruitful.

Even if this period of ***Nona Gate*** when no fire would be lit in the house and consequently no food will be cooked in the home, meant to you and to your children having to forego or delay a meal at the regular time, you should not let anybody grumble about it. It must be taken up in a real spirit of adventure. This then should be the best time to make new resolutions for the coming year.

Here is number one. Keeping in mind the need for the unbroken continuity of our religious and cultural traditions, whether we are Buddhists or Hindus, as people with a history of more than twenty-five centuries, have we a fully groomed younger generation who will take it upon themselves to nurture it and pass it on to those who succeed them. It is indeed lamentable that most parents do not entertain such ideas of safeguarding their religious and cultural heritage.

For most parents, it is as though each generation has to start things all over again. They reckon less with a concept of continuity, of transmission, of handing over their inheritance. In bringing up children, most parents adopt only a stop gap attitude - qualify them for better paid jobs. No more, no less. Today, how and where one's children are schooled is a question of social prestige to the parents. It is looked upon as though the children, both boys and girls, are to be provided opportunities to do what they cannot do in normal schools or even in their own homes. Strangely enough, schools today are said to be competitively struggling to provide opportunities for swimming, playing rugger, playing chess at international levels and a few other out-of-the-ordinary activities.

Through these elitist channels, the teenagers of both sexes seem to find no shortages of sex and alcohol even at their school age. Well below twenty years in age in both groups, we know. What a prosperous age of supply and demand in Sri Lanka. As the teenagers, both boys and girls, demand, the parents timidly supply.

You only wish for a thing, or make a vociferous demand if you are driven to it, and in a moment the money with which the neo-rich in the country are inundated, brings it within their reach. Most of these happen, we are assured, with the knowledge and connivance of parents, whatever the adduced reasons may be. Parents beware. And be warned of the impending disaster.



New Resolves for the Sinhala and Hindu New Year Day Celebrations 2

[03- 04- 96]

Professor Dhammavihari Thera

We are agreed that children, born and to be born, are the asset of the nation. The education of these children is a vital and major concern of parents. It has necessarily to be so. But today what is a nation's concept of education? Definitely it cannot merely be a passport to social elitism of a confused society. Nor should it merely be a job-oriented training, qualifying a young man or woman to get into a position of earning the maximum amount of money within the shortest amount of time. With the high-tide of consumerism in the country and the global extravagance in luxury expenditure, the sky is the limit for earned incomes. Or much worse, the struggle to earn.

Buddhists certainly are required to have a much more efficient and a totally comprehensive concept of education. Far ahead of the best education-philosophers of today, the Buddhists held the belief that education was a training for life, to make better men and women of the humans. Fifty sixty years ago, the best educationists in the world started saying the same. We need to get back to this.

The western world is already ahead of us in this. They would back us to the hilt. **Sikkhā** or training which is a recurrent theme in Buddhism, would be one of the prime concerns of education. The word **sikkhati** in Pali means training oneself or getting trained, getting adjusted to and qualified for. While discussing the role of parents in relation to their children, Buddhism insists that parents show the

world to their children: *imassa lokassa dassetāro*. This indeed is the basic grooming for life. This is further triply qualified in the famous injunctions of the Sigāla Sutta where we are told that among the many kind and generous things that parents do for their children, they **1. keep their children away from evil** or *pāpā nivārenti*, **2. set them on the path of virtue** or *kalyāṇe nivesenti* and also **3. give them a professional training for a living** or *sikkham sikkhāpentī*.

This should give our Buddhist parents plenty of food for thought in planning an education for their children. But lamentably what happens everywhere in the world today is that parents are either reconciled or compelled to sit back in their chairs and look up with admiration or astonishment at what planners provide for their children via their ministries.

But we do still want to believe that we have parents with sufficient thought power and adequately sharp vision to see through the follies of these impoverished planners and shout with indignation at what they produce. In many parts of the wiser world state educational policies are sent back a second and third time for revision. In a country with such maturity of judgement on these subjects, we are not only surprised but very much distressed and dismayed that there are not enough justifiable challenges from people who should know better.

On the other hand, in such almost irremediable situations like these, not only in education but in many other segments too, there lie many possibilities of correction. These deficiencies in state educational policies could and should be put right in many cases at domestic level. There should be no passing over of the baby to another. Those who as parents take upon themselves the serious task of rearing children should realize that it is incumbent on them to produce society-worthy children. It is the failure in this area that has led to the serious escalation of juvenile delinquency in both the developed and less developed countries in the world.

To put things right here, it is our considered opinion that we should begin by

consolidating the home and stabilizing the life-style there. It is no secret to anyone that political, economic and some socio-religious considerations of more recent times, say the last two or three decades, are tearing apart the unitary character of life in the home in Sri Lanka. Virulent party politics in this country and the diabolic nature of canvassing for each group have made mortal enemies of husbands and wives, and it works more so with parents and children and brothers and sisters.

Real or inflated economic hardships of the day has necessitated economic gallops almost in every segment of society. Secretly or overtly introduced alien life styles of food and clothing, entertainment, and gluttonously advertised and alluringly propagated consumerism basically underlie the voracious need for extra money in the home. The spiralling cost of living adds fuel to the fire.

It is made out, wisely or unwisely, that everybody has to lend a hand to earn more for the family. This opens out the doors for many people for many things. This is indeed an opportunity everybody has been waiting for. For the feminist activists, at least in Sri Lanka, this paves the way to make their demands for equal job opportunities and equal wages. To the mother or the lady of the house, by whatever name you call her, this is a grand opportunity for her economic independence over her husband. There is going to be no mother at home whose responsibility it is to care for the children she begat.



Hindu and Sinhala New Year Greetings - 1999

Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari

"May no fears affect you. May no illnesses afflict you. May no dangers come your way. May you enjoy good health and long life."

These are my very sincere greetings to every one of you listening to me at this moment. I encompass you with thoughts of love from the depth of my heart.

Tomorrow would be the New Year's day for good many of you in our country, when you meet your families and meet your friends and greet each other, wishing good luck and happiness for another time slot of one year.

Working out the New Year on the solar calendar as we do today is the outcome of beliefs in astrology and astronomy entertained by our forefathers. They come to us from pre-Galilean times. And for sure, we own them with pride.

From whichever angle we look, it is our wish for happiness and comfort, for prosperity and abundance which motivate us in these directions. The motivation, it has to be conceded, is well below the level of religion and spirituality. But we have been all very clever to integrate our religions with this line of thinking and seek the assistance of the agents of religion, the gods above, to push our aspirations further.

But in terms of science and philosophy today, man has pushed the frontiers further. He has probed deeper into the fountains which generate human happiness and spelt out most of the causes which bring disaster on mankind. They have been proved to be in the hands of man and well within his reach. Whether they have been the disasters of World War II, including the bombs over Hiroshima or the bumper harvests of corn elsewhere.

This new angle of vision of seeing things with accuracy and honesty does no violence to religion at all, if only men and women of all ages do really endeavour to know what their religions can claim to deliver. And, on the other hand, their human agents of religion down below here are honest enough not to exploit the credulity of the masses, playing on many areas of social life, like health, wealth and vitality, with promises of restoring whatever is lost through recklessness of man himself.

In the area of human health, both medicine and surgery have reached incredible heights. Men, women and children have been wonderfully relieved of numerous congenital defects, of malformed organs and defective parts of bodies. Preventive medical care, professionally recommended by men and women who are dedicated to it, and faithfully observed by those who need it, have been a great deal more than prayers answered.

In terms of modern economic theories, wealth seems to be hardly heaven sent. It is very clear to us how it is generated, both here and elsewhere. It is generally through extra-religious or more genuinely through irreligious means that vast amounts of unaccountable monies get credited into the accounts of people, anywhere in the world. Several notable cases in the world have come to light recently and many responsible people are pining behind prison bars for their irresponsible deeds.

I thought I would bring to light a few instances like these in order to show how people in the world today, particularly in Sri Lanka, confuse religion, culture, health care, economic well-being and political ideologies, all in one, and set up massive propaganda machinery for the purpose of achieving for each one very personal gains in diverse areas.

Innocent people in rural areas who are severely handicapped in many ways and subject to economic hardships, or are alienated from their own lands, or are become victims of war much against their wishes, have to be warned against these delightfully veiled generous gestures coming from all directions.

So on days like these, when people meet one another on a very healthy note of mutual well wishing, it is necessary that they inquire with a high degree of honesty and sincerity about each one's well-being in all areas of human growth and uplift.

These inquiries should contain references to personal health, family structures, economic well-being, educational growth and spiritual maturity of

persons of all ages, of both men and women. This is the only way to take care of a nation, and not through honours conferred on a select few, posthumously or in person.

They should also utilize the wealth of their religious traditions to bring harmony in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community like Sri Lankans. Let our religious leaders meet, with their cards on the table, well above board.

What good does it do to adore the sun and the moon above, as gods or goddesses, and plead with them for greater shares of allocations on ethnic or religious basis. It was good enough for Horatio Nelson then, for victory. This is not worthy of Sri Lankans today, no matter to what religious denomination they belong.

May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.

